





# Hollywood's Golden Year

ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RELEASE OF  
**GONE WITH THE WIND AND THE WIZARD OF OZ, BOB LARKINS  
LOOKS BACK AT 1939, HOLLYWOOD'S GREATEST YEAR**

All movie buffs like to play the 'What if?' game. What if, for example, Robert Donat had not pulled out of *Captain Blood* at the last moment? Would Errol Flynn have become a star? Where would the Bogart legend be if George Raft had not turned down *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*? And what if Randolph Scott, and not Leslie Howard, had played Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*?

Randolph Scott?!!! Not as unlikely as it may seem, really, since Randy was a genuine Southern aristocrat from one of the great families, and it has been reported that Margaret Mitchell, author of *GWTW* thought he would be the perfect Ashley Wilkes. Take a look at him next time Belle Starr is screened on T.V., and think about it.

The question is promoted by the CEL re-release of the film acknowledged as Hollywood's greatest achievement, as part of the world celebrations to mark its golden anniversary.

And here's another 'What if?' - what if Paulette Goddard had played Scarlett O'Hara? Paulette was the front-runner, in fact she almost had the role sewn up, until Vivien Leigh appeared on the scene. And with the CEL release, you can actually make the comparison. The special three-cassette memorial package also includes the brilliant documentary *The Making of Legend*, a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the making of *GWTW*, including the screen tests for the other actresses who might have played Scarlett.

1989 is also the 50th anniversary of another MGM classic, *The Wizard of Oz*, also re-issued by CEL, also restored to its original technicolor glory, and with an added bonus - twenty minutes of extra footage that has never been shown before. It includes Ray Bolger's scarecrow dance sequence, cut from the film, but shown in the compilation video *That's Dancing*; the dress rehearsal version of the film's other cut number, 'Jitterbug' and a soundtrack recording of 'If I Only Had A Heart' sung by the original Tin Man, Buddy Ebsen. Treasures indeed!

If 1939 had produced only these two enduring movie masterpieces, it would deserve recognition as one of the great movie years. But as any true movie lover knows, this was

THE year in the history of Hollywood, and *Oz* and *GWTW* are no more than the tip of the iceberg.

Consider some of the other titles from this greatest of all years: *Beau Geste*, *Destry Rides Again*, *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Women*, *Dark Victory*, *Gunga Din*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Stagecoach*, *Intermezzo*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *Ninotchka*, *Jesse James*. It reads like everybody's list of all-time classics.

Whatever special magic hovered over the Hollywood studios in 1939, it has never been re-created. Every one of the films listed as above has been remade - sometimes more than once - since original, or to generate such affection and critical acclaim.

Will the same be said in 2039 of the year's box-office blockbusters? Will there be queues around the block for a 50th anniversary re-issue of *Ghostbusters II*, *Batman*, or *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? Somehow I doubt it. At the time of writing, box-office figures for these three films are staggering, around the \$100 million mark in their first week of release. By comparison, *Gone With The Wind* made only \$945,000 in its first week only \$14 million in its first year.

Only? Consider this: a movie ticket in 1939 cost around twenty-five to fifty cents - and it takes an awful lot of bums on seats to ring up \$14 million at 50 cents a bum! By 1956, *Gone With The Wind* had been seen by a estimated 100 million people; it ran for an uninterrupted six years in London on its first release, and after the end of World War Two ran for two and a half years in East Berlin. On adjusted figures, translating audience numbers into contemporary ticket prices, it has to date taken around \$2.1 billion world wide!

The difference between a film as endearing as *Gone With The Wind* and a film like *Ghostbusters II* is, I think, the difference between the society of 1939 and the society of the 1980's. We live in an age of instant sensation - instant food, instant fashion, instant entertainment. A movie must grab audiences, pummel them into acceptance, dazzle them with technical virtuosity, work them up to a frenzy of excitement. If the actors become merely puppets of the special effects, if the story is no more than a string of





vaguely related incidents on which to hang the next piece of fireworks, who cares? It's the instant gratification that counts.

Aaron Spelling, who has made a fortune out of T.V. junk, has described his programs as 'fast food television', designed for a short, profitable shelf life, with no intrinsic substance. Use it up, throw it away, pick up the next brightly - coloured package, with the next super - whizz-bang special ingredient. The same can really be said of most of today's movies, even those as hugely enjoyable as *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*, or, going back a little, *Star Wars*.

Notice how *Star Wars* seems sillier, more shallow, even a little tedious now? The initial, mind - boggling thrill of it is gone, and without the wrap-around sound and hysterical publicity hype, reduced to the size of a T.V. screen, it really has very little going for it. By comparison, *Wuthering Heights* or *Goodbye Mr. Chips* can still be enthralling and deeply moving, even on the small screen; *Beau Geste* and *Gunga Din* can still thrill with that unabashed gusto that seems so totally unforced by comparison with the admittedly fabulous, but still contrived hit-you-over - the-head thrills of *Indiana Jones*.

And what of the stars? In 1939, there were Gable, Garbo, The Duke, Jimmy Stewart, Coop, Judy, Mickey, Bette, Henry Fonda, Deitrich, Laughton, Cagney, Bogart, Don Ameche - legends all, and in the case of Mickey, Bette and Don Ameche, still

working, still unchanging audiences and critics. Will we be able to say the same of Bill Murray, Michael Keaton, Dan Ayckroyd or even Jack Nicholson in 50 years' time? Again, I doubt it.

The stars of 1939 enjoyed an advantage denied to today's big names of the much-maligned 'studio system'. Unlike, say Robert Redford, they didn't wait two or three years between films - they kept working. And more importantly, they kept learning, honing their skills, perfecting their technique in good films and bad, building their legends. In 1939 alone, Jimmy Stewart was in five movies, Bette Davis in four, Henry Fonda in five. Their entire career didn't have to hang on the success or failure of one movie - if they had a flop, no problem, there would be another one, or two, or three movies in release within a year or less.

Of today's stars, only a handful seem likely to attain this same legendary status, and if I had to pick a couple, I would nominate, without hesitation, Sean Connery and Michael Caine. For the simple reason that both have kept working, virtually non-stop, since they attained stardom. Certainly they have made some dreadful movies, perhaps more failures than successes in Michael Caine's case, but like the stars of 1939, they have learned, grown, matured. Sean Connery must surely be one of the main ingredients in the success of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; Michael Caine effortlessly stole *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* from Steve Martin. They get better with each film, while the Bill Murrays, and Eddie Murphys give the same predictable performance.

But, intellectual skepticism aside, movies are an art form, and only those imbued with true artistic ability will endure for generations. There is precious little artistry to be found in most of today's movies.

Perhaps the next 50 years will prove me wrong. Perhaps *Batman* will become the *Gone with the Wind* of 2039. I won't be around to see it, but I'd be willing to make a small wager that there will be a 100th anniversary celebration for *Gone With The Wind*, and the yet - unborn stars of the day will seem pale shadows when compared with Gable, Vivien, Leslie Howard and Olivia de Havilland.

# WIN

A DELUXE TRIPLE PACK INCLUDING:

*Gone With The Wind* and *Making Of A Legend* - valued at \$99.95

OR

THE LIMITED EDITION *The Wizard Of Oz* - valued at \$39.95

The first five correct entries opened will win a deluxe triple pack, the next five correct entries opened will win the Limited Edition pack, courtesy of CEL.

Just answer the following question, placing it on the back of an envelope with your name and address and mail it to:

**CEL 50th Anniversary Video Competition,  
1 Booth st., Annandale, NSW 2038.**

Entries close September 30, 1989. Winners will be notified by mail and published in the November 1989 editions of Video News and Video International.

**Q: Who played Dorothy in The Wizard Of Oz?**

NOTE: This competition is not open to staff of CEL and Solid Gold Publications or their immediate family members.